

Seneca's imaginary friend?

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The philosopher, playwright and imperial adviser Seneca spent the last years of his life in retirement, having fallen out of favour with his sometime pupil, the emperor Nero. It was during these years that he wrote his *Letters to Lucilius*, of which the first 124 survive (a reference in a later text suggests there were originally a further two books of letters, now lost). A dominant theme of the collection is the imminence of death. It can have been little surprise to Seneca when Nero's messenger finally arrived, instructing him to kill himself.

Dear Lucilius.....

Seneca's correspondent Lucilius, apparently a few years younger than Seneca, served as an equestrian procurator in Sicily. It seems from the letters that they were close friends. Letter 40, for instance, begins by thanking Lucilius for his frequent correspondence: 'You are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without at once being in your company'. Letter 46 praises in the warmest terms a work written by Lucilius which he has just sent to Seneca, while letter 79 criticises Lucilius' plan to write a poem about Mount Etna. Mutual friends are referred to (e.g. in letters 11 and 29).

Seneca's letters are, however, primarily concerned with offering Lucilius philosophical guidance, helping him along the road to becoming a Stoic 'wise man', (someone who is '*sapiens*' in

Stoics and Stoicism

It's hard to say what a Stoic was, or was supposed to be, in the Roman period, or indeed to define 'Stoicism'. Let's just say that it is a philosophical movement founded by a guy called Zeno in fourth-century Athens and one that teaches that virtue is sufficient for happiness (mmm... not sure about that one!). Seneca is one of several surviving Roman writers to present Stoicism as a way of life.

Latin). Some letters present themselves as responses to letters from Lucilius: 'You write to me that you are anxious about the result of a lawsuit,' begins letter 24. Others are apparently sparked by specific incidents; letter 86 is ostensibly prompted by a visit to the villa of Scipio Africanus. But it is rarely possible to pinpoint individual letters to a particular time. There are almost no references in them to matters that require explanation in order to be intelligible to the 'external reader' (in strong contrast to Cicero's letters, for instance, which are full of allusive detail). And Seneca in the letters explicitly refers to himself as writing for future generations (8.2; 21.4). Thus while for centuries the letters were seen as genuine correspondence, sent to Lucilius and responding to letters received from him, most scholars now agree that the letters make more sense viewed as a philosophical project, addressed to a specific recipient but written with an 'external reader' in mind. Lucilius does seem to have been a real person; an inscription from Cyprus records some details of his earlier career, if we assume – plausibly – that it refers to the same Lucilius. Even if Seneca did have a friend called Lucilius, we need not assume the letters were sent to him on a regular basis.

Ask the author

Yet if this is the case then we need to ask why Seneca chose to present his work in the form of a series of letters. One function of the letters as a sequence is to allow Seneca to chart the philosophical progress of his 'pupil'. This is a particular focus of the earlier letters in the collection. Letter 5, for instance, praises Lucilius for his commitment to self-improvement, while letter 34 begins:

I grow in spirit, jump for joy and, throwing off old age, grow warm again, when I get a sense from what you do and what you write of how far you have outdone yourself; for you surpassed the common herd long ago'.

The earlier letters often draw on the philosophy of movements other than Stoicism (e.g. the teachings of Epicurus with their emphasis on living a happy life). But later letters show a more sustained engagement with increasingly complex aspects of Stoic thought. A number of philosophical themes run through the letters. These include the brevity of human life, the irrelevance of worldly goods, the advisability of suicide, the endurance of pain. The choice of letter-form allows a topic to be raised in one letter, then revisited, perhaps from a different angle, later in the collection. Seneca includes letters on what might appear to be more conventional themes for letter-writing, such as consolation to the bereaved, but with the introduction of a distinctive Stoic twist (Letters 63, 99). In general the letter-form allows Seneca an important degree of fluidity. 'Each new letter re-situates the author differently in a new time, a new mood, sometimes in a new place', in the words of Marcus Wilson. The tone changes from one letter to another, but also within letters; the variety we might associate with a collection of correspondence thus serves to display Seneca's mastery of a huge range of literary registers – a much more seductive approach for the reader than continuous explanation of philosophical theory.

Maintaining traditions

There was already a Greek tradition of philosophical letter-writing, associated with the influential philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. – Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus – on which Seneca draws. However, Seneca also plays with the Roman literary tradition, most particularly Cicero, with whose correspondence he compares and contrasts his own. Indeed it may well have been the publication of Cicero's letters to his friend, Atticus, which offered Seneca immediate inspiration for a collection of letters addressed to a single correspondent. Letter 21.4 boasts that Seneca's letters to Lucilius will bring Lucilius as much fame as Cicero's letters brought Atticus (it is tempting to see a certain irony here, as Seneca elsewhere disapproves of the desire for worldly fame).

Yet letter 118 offers a more explicitly critical response to Cicero's legacy, suggesting a contrast between the political news and gossip exchanged by Cicero and Atticus and the more significant concerns of Seneca's own correspondence.

There will always be something to write about even if I pass over all the kinds of news with which Cicero fills his letters: which candidate is having problems, who is competing on borrowed funds and who on his own. But it

is better to deal with one's own troubles rather than those of other people - to scrutinise oneself, see for how many pointless things one is a candidate and not vote for any of them. This, my dear Lucilius, is a noble thing: to canvass for nothing, and to pass by all fortune's elections.

Thus Roman public life, the primary concern of Cicero's letters, the context in which and from which Cicero and associates takes its meaning, is transformed into a vocabulary of image and metaphor through which the would-be philosopher's inner life can be expressed and debated.

Some letters, as we have seen, evoke an intimacy between author and addressee, an intimacy which seems to echo that between Cicero and Atticus. Another example, letter 49, begins by describing how a visit to Campania, and particularly Naples and Puteoli, reminded him of his absent friend:

They struck me with an amazingly fresh sense of longing for you. You stand right in front of my eyes. I am just about to leave you. I see you choking back your tears and failing to resist the emotions that well up inside you, as you try to control them.

But this vividly personal picture is swiftly subsumed to a more philosophical purpose, a reminder of the shortness of life and the consequent need to dispense with debating trivia in order to concentrate on coming to terms with the fear of death.

Thus the letters ultimately tell us little about Lucilius. They also tell us remarkably little about Seneca's own life. Details which may appear autobiographical, such as the reference to Seneca's father disapproving of his son's vegetarianism (108.22), invariably serve a philosophical purpose and should hardly be relied on for their accuracy. It would be impossible to write a biography in the conventional sense based on these letters.

Finding oneself

Yet at the same time, the letter's capacity to explore the inner self of its author emerges strongly from the collection. While the letters ostensibly present themselves as one side of a dialogue between two individuals; often they seem more concerned with the articulation of one individual's inner dialogue. On a number of occasions, Seneca explicitly presents himself as the addressee of his own advice. At 26.7, he writes 'I say this to myself but you should imagine me saying it to you too.' The next letter develops this point further:

'What', you say, 'are you giving me advice? I suppose you've already advised yourself, already corrected your own faults? Is that what leaves you free to reform others?' No, listen to me as you would if I were talking to myself. I am admitting you to my inmost thoughts and, with you as my guest, I am taking myself to task (27.1).

Such a move serves to present Seneca himself as attractively self-critical. But this kind of dramatised inner dialogue should also be seen as part of a new way of thinking about the self. Stoic thinkers over the previous couple of centuries had come to focus increasingly on self-scrutiny as an important activity for the would-be philosopher. Seneca's letters exhort Lucilius to mould himself, to transform himself. The letters claim to chart Lucilius' philosophical progress but Seneca too is undergoing a transformation. Letter 6 begins: 'I sense, my dear Lucilius, that I am being not just reformed but transformed'. Lucilius is, we may suspect, no more than a useful peg for Seneca. Seneca is writing for the future, certainly, but we should perhaps see the letters as addressed above all to their own author.

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